

EDITING OVER COFFEE: Conversations with Polish editors

Interview with Lidia Zonn

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Published on the Polish Editors' Association web site (www.psm.org.pl) on February 20, 2014

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Lidia Zonn – born in 1934; editor affiliated with the Documentary Film Studio in Warsaw; an instructor for many years at the National Film School in Łódź. Edited such films as The Musicians, The Year of Frank W. and From the Point of View of a Night Porter.

How did you decide to become an editor?

My father was an academic, an astronomer. As a result, I thought all through middle school that I would study physics. At the time of the first physics Olympiad, however, I noticed that one of my classmates performed much better than I did. This was a sign for me that physics might not be my calling. That classmate later became a professor in the field, and I began to look for other things that might interest me.

I was a cinephile. One day, I read a report from the set of a film by René Clair in one of our film journals. I realized then that a director has many assistants and I decided to try my hand at film. I came to the Film School in Łódź. I didn't expect to become a director, but I hoped that somewhere in this great crew, I would find my place. Maybe for the first two years, I still had some hope of directing. But when the projects on set started and I had to direct a crew, I realized that I did not like having such a large number of people dependent on me, that I don't know how to bring them all around to my vision with a strong hand. When I sat down to edit, however, I thought that here, I could do something. In my third year, I became something like the junior assistant of Professor Brzożowski—a documentary filmmaker whom, unfortunately, no one remembers today. He involved me in his exercises as a kind of technical assistant. I ran around with notebooks, made sure the students turned everything in on time, looked after the equipment... At that point, I was already determined to become an editor.

At the time, the Documentary Film Studio in Warsaw began constructing a soundstage for fiction films. I had some trouble with my final student project and I received a low grade. Since I had excellent grades in the other subjects, though, Jerzy Bossak decided that if I was interested in editing, I could count on a position at the Studio. With the new building would come a need for new editors. I waited for that position for a year and a half.

At the beginning, of course, I was running from one editing room to another, carrying boxes. My older colleagues wanted to show this student what it means to really be in the editing room. I would assist them until four or five every day, and in the evenings and at night I would sit down to edit. That's how I was able to edit *The Musicians* and *Men on the Road*. Only during the

making of *The Junction*¹ did I get my own editing room, though obviously without an assistant and without any contract or money. It was the Studio's good will to provide me with an editing room.

When did the great leap come, the move from the position of an assistant to that of an independent editor?

Because I had a diploma from the Film School, I was able to avoid the narrow and long road of becoming an independent editor. Awards also helped: *The Musicians* received a Golden Lion in Venice. I formally trained as an assistant for some five years. However, already during this time, I signed the films with my name.²

Once you became an independent editor, were you given an assistant?

Naturally. Working with film at the time, an assistant was indispensable. There was much, much more preparatory work compared with today. Now, this work involves primarily digitizing the material, entering it into the computer. Back then, we would have needed to synchronize the sound and image, to mark up the different copies—we used a regular fountain pen and ink for that. When something was cut or some frames removed, we had to describe in detail what we had done and then skillfully hide the cut. One meter of film strip is two seconds. It's easy to multiply and see that thirty meters is just a minute. So even in the case of a short piece there were kilometers of film. We had our own systems for keeping things orderly which were entirely the responsibility of the assistant. It was a valuable arrangement because the assistant would sometimes also be present during the editing of the film. While rolling up sections of film or searching for a double, the assistant would witness discussions between the editor and the director. At times, s/he joined in the conversation or was asked his/her opinion.³ Hence, assistantship was seen as a form of professional training. Many editors came into the profession in this way. They came entirely unprepared, but after seven or eight years, having passed all the stages, they would become professionals in their own right. To achieve the title of an independent documentary editor one had to complete ten films; for the title of an independent feature editor – one full-length film. I was very willing to go along with the ideas of my colleagues, and it is easy to notice that, on many of the films I have edited, there are two names listed. With Ala Siemińska, my longtime assistant, we did everything together. Today, I couldn't tell you what my contribution was and what was hers.

¹ *The Musicians* (1960), *Men on the Road* (1960), and *The Junction* (1961) were all directed by Kazimierz Karabasz, Lidia Zonn's husband. She would continue to be the editor on most of his films, in addition to many others. She worked closely with Krzysztof Kieślowski and Marcel Łoziński, for example, as well as the unfairly overlooked female documentary director Danuta Halladin. She and Karabasz were married until he passed away in 2018.

² The sentence is: "Jednak już w tym okresie, podpisywałam filmy swoim nazwiskiem." The above is the literal translation. We think she means giving herself a credit, so perhaps it could read, "However, already during this time I received an editing credit."

³ The terms for both "assistant" and "editor," like most nouns, are gendered in Polish: "asystent" (male)/"asystentka" (female) and "montażysta" (male)/"montażystka" (female). Zonn tends to use the male form for the word "assistant" throughout, except when speaking of herself. Like the English "man," however, the male form of the noun can stand for a person of either gender. That is why we have chosen to translate it using the s/he form here. The same is true for her use of the word "editor" except when referring specifically to her own generation, when she uses the female form.

Back in the day, an assistant was necessary because of the quantity of work involved in editing film. Today, do you still look for help? Is another person necessary?

Yes, but it seems to be that there is a serious drawback. The editor and the assistant pass by one another. First, the assistant sits down and loads all the material in the computer. Then the editor sits down and the work on the film begins. After it is finished, the assistant sits down again for the final touches. During my time in the profession, there were always three of us [in the room]: the director, the editor, and the assistant. This created a unique, almost family-like atmosphere. Whenever we would encounter a problem, we would ask the assistant for his/her opinion or he/she would suggest something himself. It was always a creative collaboration.

What is your attitude towards the development of new editing tools? The transition from film to digital technology is undoubtedly a major revolution.

Along the way, there was also linear editing on Betacams, but it was some kind of misunderstanding. This technology placed terrible restrictions on editing; it was not editing for us. The digital revolution brought something more analogous to working with the film strip. I worked for thirty years using the traditional method. During this time, I experienced many different stages in the development of this method, and I was sure that digital editing wouldn't amuse me. However, when the Editing School was established at the Film School and the first-year students arrived, they were all already from "the digital generation." For the purposes of the classes, I learned how to use VHS, but I didn't have either the courage or the intention to sit down at the computer. It wasn't until my husband (the filmmaker Kazimierz Karabasz) bought a digital camera and decided to make a film as important to us as *Meetings* that I decided to sit down at the computer. Learning how to use Final Cut cost me six months of nerves. One of our graduates, Adam Kwiatek, taught me everything from scratch. I am not the best student, and I still have to ask our graduates or colleagues familiar with the subject for help. On the other hand, I edit alone at home and have no contact with the technician responsible for the technical side of the computer.

What do you think my generation—the generation which never had contact with the film strip—loses in this process? I've read somewhere that you are a proponent of the idea that every student should make at least one cut on a piece of film.

Today, I've changed my mind. Now I know for sure that film belongs in the museum, that it is an anachronism. A generation of editors who have moved from the editing tables to the computer feel great about it. There is no reason to return to film. As for moving in the other direction: when I've watched students sit down at the tables and try to put together their short works on film, I realized that this other technology also took a long time to learn. It requires a lot of practice, and they could not cope with the reels, the film all over the floor, everything falling apart. Additionally, film is expensive and there are no spare parts anymore for the editing tables. The era of film is over.

So we really haven't lost anything?

Not completely. First of all, working with film taught people to observe carefully and to take responsibility for their decisions. Today, this is lacking. I try to make students aware of this. I warn them against cutting things too quickly, ask them to use the longest possible version of each shot (if not the shot in its entirety) in their first cuts in order to teach them to watch the shots carefully and to assess their value. The ease of editing today leads people to make many

different versions just to check if something will work when what they should be doing is trying to make each new cut correspond more to their initially articulated goals for the project, to make sure it is carefully thought out and that it leads to something.

People certainly feel less responsible for the editing decisions they make. Previously, every cut left a mark, even if it could be undone with scotch tape, so every decision to cut carried a lot of responsibility. Today, one can have fun with editing. It is easy to manipulate sound and image, and there are no technical consequences if a mistake is made. All this has taken responsibility away from the editor. Back then, it would not have occurred to us to ‘play around’ with the editing. Each action demanded some amount of physical effort: finding the correct part of the film, gluing things together or taking them apart (often one would lose a frame in the process). As a result of this, every decision involved a lot of reflection and thought.

Is today’s editing any different from before?

Yes, it’s different. I was talking recently with Michał Rogalski about the book I am currently working on ⁴ and he led me to a contemporary editing room. There was a seat for the editor. Five meters behind it, an elegant sofa for the director, everything beautifully finished, not far from the cafeteria and the hot coffee. We didn’t have anything like that. At most, an electric kettle, in most cases one even without a thermostat, large wooden tables, some shelves and uncomfortable armchairs. The atmosphere in the place, however, was great. We brewed coffee and tea, sat around and talked. There were friends nearby and sometimes company came and watched. The film was alive: there was always someone who could be consulted. If there was a bigger problem, you would take the film under your arm, go to the projection room, and invite your friends and everyone there to advise. There was nothing like jealousy then. People could be jealous of our good ideas, but they would all be absolutely well-meaning toward that idea. They could criticize the work harshly, but the intention was always to make the best possible film out of that idea. Today, that atmosphere is gone.

Does the availability of editing tools to the broader masses now diminish the overall level of skillfulness? Those who are interested can reach any level through trial and error.

I agree with you. Everything loses its value in this process. As more and more people begin to edit, the standards are lowered, the quality declines. This is a big topic. I think it is in large part due to the expansion of television, the growing number of channels, the growing demand for television programs. This requires the rapid processing of huge amounts of material, which makes all the processes—the the direction and the performance—more banal.

Today, we are dealing with much more competition.

Yes, we didn’t have to face that. Of course, a film could be bad, a colleague might find himself surrounded. But there were always certain ethical criteria that informed both the relationships between people and the selection of topics, the framing choices, and the editing solutions that were employed. Today, I see a complete lack of rules of any kind among documentary filmmakers, which was unthinkable in my environment. Of course, there were people who were

⁴ It isn’t clear to what book she’s referring. The interview was held in 2014 and the most recent book that we know of was published in 2008 (“W montażowni – wczoraj”) (“In the editing room – yesterday”). She is also the author of two previous books: “On Editing in Documentary Film” (“O montażu w filmie dokumentalnym,” 1986) and “Around Editing” (Wokół montażu, 2001).

ideologically different, who made opportunistic, agitational films for the Party, there was the political opposition, there were neutral directors, and those who simply observed the reality around us. Despite these differences, they did not cross certain lines in their dealings with their subjects and it was obvious to them that there were limits not to be crossed. They respected the privacy of their subjects.

Has documentary changed? Is it different from documentary thirty years ago?

Documentary has changed tremendously. The digital camera has been a great discovery for documentarians. When I think about those big crews that would enter an apartment and “corner” the subject... and today, there’s a small, noiseless camera that you can completely ignore... These were the two most serious problems that limited our ability to get close to the subject of a documentary: the road⁵, the limited film stock, and the crew. Today, these problems are gone. At the same time, documentarians now go deeper and deeper into the private lives of their subjects, crossing a line the subject would not want to have crossed. These limits should be respected. If we are dealing with a man unaware of what a documentary filmmaker is able to do with him, then this “thin red line” should be clearly marked out for him and respected.

Today, the camera is small and light. Directors often pick it up themselves. Even if they work with a DP, it is often just the two of them without any lights. These possibilities are invaluable for documentary filmmakers, but they also pose some threats, enabling the filmmaker to penetrate ever deeper into the private life of the protagonist. Digital editing has opened up completely new subjects for documentary filmmaking, new means to look deeper into human affairs and it is very valuable.

Apart from the subject matter of the film, has digital technology changed the audiovisual consciousness of the people who use it?

I doubt it when I see how people wave digital cameras around on trips, on beaches and in other places. Indeed, I find that, unfortunately, it hasn’t. These tools are very easy to use. Everyone can record something for himself and is usually delighted with it. It absolutely doesn’t build any kind of [artistic] sensibility. It is just as flattening and trivializing as the majority of televised programs and series whose execution is nightmarish and whose actors are absolutely false. People, nevertheless, look at them with enthusiasm. Once upon a time, it was passionate enthusiasts who reached for the camera. They humbly waited for the right light, the right subject they had designated for themselves. Effort was required to master the technical aspects of the camera. Amateur filmmakers, in turn, made films on narrow-gauge film. This had to do with passion, it did not just happen of its own accord. It was passion that drove them to master the technology. Today, the ease of use of most technology has taken that passion away from them. Of course, I’m not speaking here about documentary filmmakers who have been properly educated and trained for the profession. For him or her, passion is an inextricable element, and technology just helps it along. The laymen, however, record for dozens of hours, take hundreds of shots... Sometimes, I am forced to look at dozens of images from various family celebrations. I throw those images in the trash because I can’t bear to look at them. Someone clicks here and

⁵ The word Zonn uses here, “droga” literally means “road.” It is unclear whether she means actual travel or the distance between the camera and the subject. Original Polish sentence: “To były dwa najpoważniejsze problemy, które ograniczały możliwości zbliżenia się do bohatera – droga, limitowana taśma i ekipa.”

there, not knowing at all what it will look like at the end. The final prints are usually poorly composed with flat, frontal lighting...

But for those guided by passion...

For those with passion, diving into the traditional technique in an independently organized laboratory setting was, doubtless, an emotionally richer experience. On the other hand, when it comes to alternative cinema, at least theoretically (although I am not all that familiar with the situation) the ease of recording and processing might produce some interesting things. People who have never had any money for film, or any chance of entering the film industry, are able to produce something if only they have imagination and modest possibilities. However, due to the generally dispassionate way in which cameras and camcorders are used, this is a small minority.

What qualities should a good editor have? What qualities should a student entering the Film School bring with him- or herself?

There is one quality I maybe exaggeratedly describe as “the imagination of the chess player”: you need to be able to see a few steps ahead. Moving one piece, you are already thinking about the next move. To test out this kind of imagination, one needs to sit down to edit. It is impossible to verify it otherwise. In some people, this form of imagination is awakened by the work process, be it a short or long experience. In others, it never is. In any case, the point is that if we insert a given shot, we need to be able to predict how it will work, how it will affect the shot that follows, and the one after that. You can’t think in terms of a single short, you have to think in terms of a sequence. It sometimes happens that a given scene in a given order does not work. After this, it often turns out that one wide shot or one bit of general information sets everything in its place. You need to be able to imagine such things, to sense where things fit and what consequences it will have for the further development of the work.

The other essential quality an editor must have is patience. Rash actions usually only damage the material. It is said about documentary filmmakers that they must have patience, but fiction filmmakers need to show patience as well. They work using different materials, they possess a different kind of imagination, different habits, but they must also find the best solutions for any given scene.

Why were there so many more women in this profession in your time than today? When we look lists of students in this field now, male names predominate.

Yes. To some extent this is a result of the change in technology. When we look at the history of editing in America, however, we see that the editors there were mainly men.⁶ In Poland, it was a largely feminized profession. To some extent, I think this was related to the impression that an editor watched over a director’s material much like a secretary watched over her boss’ papers. Then, it became associated with women because they are generally more precise, more patient, and more orderly, and from there it became a kind of tradition. Today, computerization has led to a shift in the proportion of men and women participating. One of the reasons for this is that men were much more eager to learn the new digital technology and support it.

⁶ Judging from the evidence unearthed on the EDITED BY website, editors in America were not mainly men, although that has tended to be the general impression about the American studio system. We hope that EDITED BY will correct that assumption.

Is there any film—documentary or fiction—which you find particularly memorable, that took your breath away?

When it comes to feature films, these would be primarily American films. American editors impress me with the precision of their work. There are many works I look at with admiration for the editing solutions employed. One such film worthy of notice is *Crash* (2004).⁷ When it comes to documentaries, we've developed our own style in Poland. This is why, comparing our films to those from other parts of the world, I think that we are more precise, more interesting in what we are able to construct through editing. There are, of course, a number of foreign films I admire such as *Woodstock* (1970), a film about that first, legendary concert. This is a very poetic film. Scorsese was one of the editors on it, and his lead editor was Thelma Schoonmaker. Telling the story on several screens, using the technology of the time, was a feat. Even setting the technology aside, the sense of variety, of skillful juxtaposition, the way each performer on stage was shot differently and edited differently impressed me. I wouldn't be able to edit in that way.

Another very good documentary is *Baraka*.⁸ a fantastic interplay of image, music, and editing. The great quantity of material the editor had to contend with, the wonderfully sped up and slowed down images... There is one more film whose title I can't remember now.⁹ It was made by one of the French documentary filmmakers from the old *cinéma vérité* group. It was about the life of animals. He used the repetition of movement. For example, when a leopard is hunting an antelope, we watch in slow motion as the leopard approaches his victim. Then, we see the same situation from another camera, and then yet another... Finally, at some point, the leopard catches the antelope. This is very risky: showing the same action multiple times from multiple points of view, but in this film, this technique is used with great sensitivity, as a means of building up the appropriate sense of drama. The hunt already has some dramaturgy built into itself. When applied to a scene documenting the flight of a bird, however, which does not have that obvious dramatic charge, it helped to build it. Of course, if I watched the film a second time, it probably would not work as well, but the idea and the way in which it is implemented seem great to me.

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Interview source:

<http://www.psm.org.pl/wypowiedzi/170-o-montazu-przy-kawie-zeszyty-rozmow-z-polskimi-montazystami-zeszyt-drugi-rozmowa-z-lidia-zonn>

Translated by Masha Shpolberg for the website EDITED BY

<http://womenfilmeditors.princeton.edu/>

to accompany this profile of Zonn:

<http://womenfilmeditors.princeton.edu/zonn-lidia/>

⁷ Edited by Hughes Winborne.

⁸ Edited by Ron Fricke, Mark Magidson, and David Aubrey.

⁹ We could not figure out to which films she's referring.